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## *Special Report*

*Parliamentary Experiment in Afghanistan*

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## PARLIAMENTARY EXPERIMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

The parliamentary system in Afghanistan remains in the testing stage a year and a half after it was instituted in this backward nation by its authoritarian but reform-minded King. The lower house deputies--representing, for the most part, the conservative and tradition-bound elements in the society--are still inexperienced in parliamentary procedure and have been slow in tackling the mass of reform legislation. The upper house is even more conservative than the lower house but has thus far exercised a less active political role. The lower house deputies have been generally antagonistic toward the cabinet, which reflects the views of the more educated and cosmopolitan segments of the society and, predictably, has been unsympathetic toward the dilatory tactics of the deputies. The present prime minister is an ineffective leader unable to control the country's conflicting forces of tradition and reform within the democratic framework. The poor showing thus far could lead the King to suspend his present experiment in parliamentary democracy.

### Political Reform

In 1963 King Mohammad Zahir Shah decided to initiate a program of political modernization in Afghanistan. Although he had accomplished important economic and social reforms in the preceding decade, political power remained in the hands of the royal family. As resentment increased among the many educated Afghans who desired a voice in the government, the King gradually realized that if Afghanistan were to avoid the revolution and republicanism that had toppled other autocratic regimes since World War II, he would have to initiate some political reforms as well.



King Zahir

The prime minister at the time was Mohammad Daud, first cousin of the King. Although there had been a slight broadening of the government's base of power during his ten years as prime minister, Daud firmly opposed any further extension of that base. The reform-oriented King, taking advantage of growing dissatisfaction among the ruling oligarchy with Daud's intemperate anti-Pakistani foreign policy which had resulted in the damaging closure of important trade routes, replaced Daud in March 1963 with Dr. Mohammad Yusuf, a liberal-minded commoner. The cabinet appointed by Yusuf was the first in Afghanistan's history without any members of the royal family.

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Zahir next named a committee to draft a new liberalized constitution. The draft was amended and approved by the traditional Afghan institution the Loya-jirgeh--a group of tribal leaders, royalty, and other notables gathered by the King to approve government actions of great importance. The constitution became effective on 1 October 1964.

The constitution provides for a bicameral legislature comprised of a 216-member lower house (Wolesi Jirgeh) and an 84-member upper house (Meshrano Jirgeh). The lower house is elected directly by universal suffrage and secret ballot. One third of the upper house is appointed by the King, another third is elected directly by the people in each of the 28 provinces, and the final third is chosen by popularly elected Provincial Councils. The King appoints the prime minister, who then chooses the rest of the cabinet. At all times the cabinet is responsible to the lower house for its policies. Although the legislative branch is granted a great deal of authority, the King retains extensive residual powers.

The Afghans held their first genuinely free elections in August and September 1965, and the new Parliament convened the following month. It has now completed three sessions.

The Upper House

The upper house has not yet assumed a position of importance. Its present president, Abdul Dawi, regards it as primarily an advisory body to the executive branch and the King, and its potential usefulness as a buffer against the cantankerous lower house--whose legislation the upper body can bottleneck--has not been tried.

In any case the full potential of the upper house cannot yet be determined because the one third of its members to be elected by the Provincial Councils have not yet been chosen because the councils themselves have not yet been established. Moreover, no plans have been made to bring them into existence in the near future.

The present 56 members of the upper house are--for the most part--more conservative than the lower house deputies. Those elected directly by the residents of the provinces are usually prestigious local religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and landowners. Included in the appointees of the King are former government officials and military officers.

The Lower House

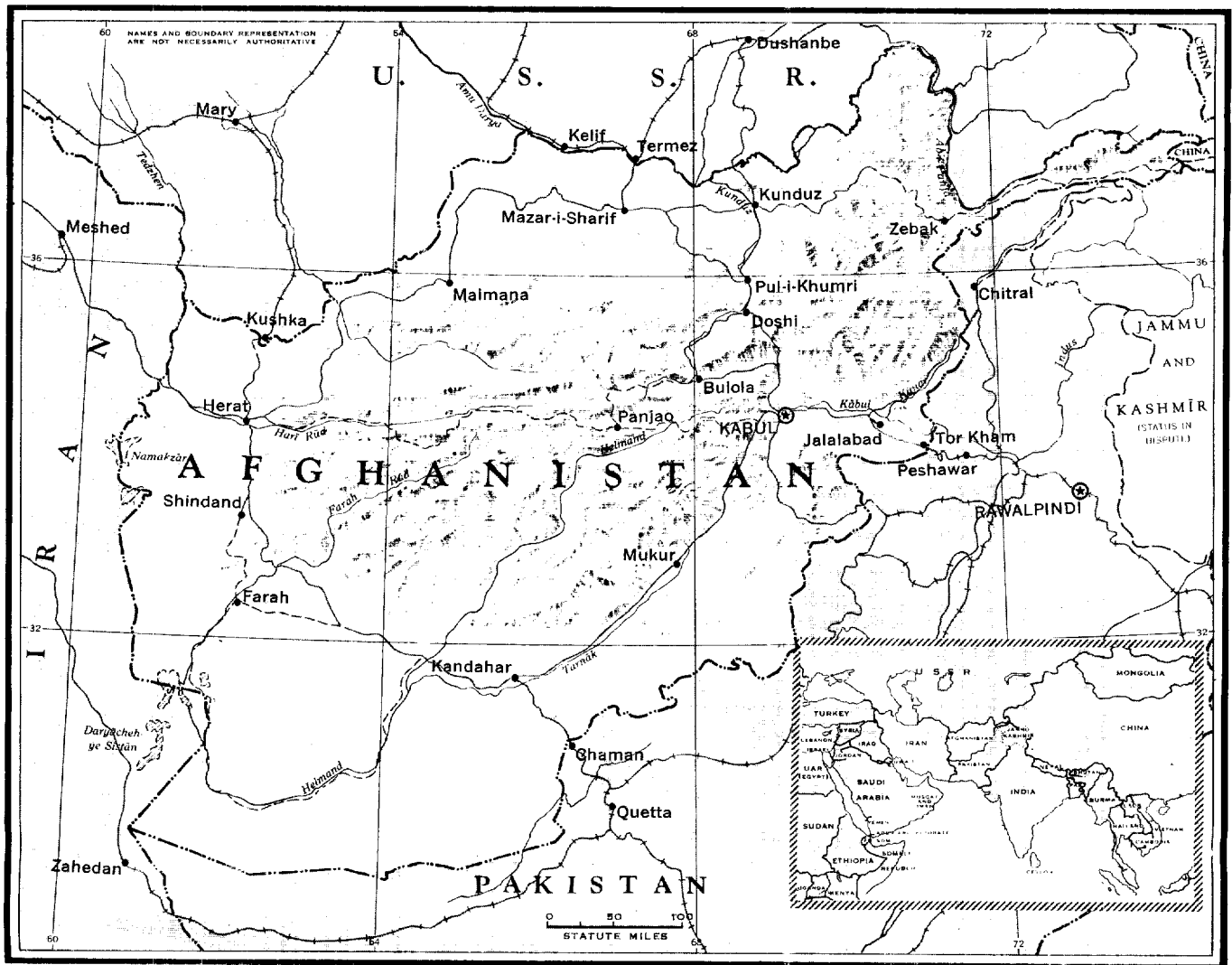
The lower house is far more powerful than the upper house

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and the scene of most parliamentary activity to date. This body can vote a no-confidence motion against the cabinet at any time, and has the final legislative decision on the budget. The development of a stable, effective parliamentary system, however, has been hindered by the inexperience of the deputies and the prohibition of political parties.

The absence of political parties--they have been proscribed heretofore and cannot be formed until enabling legislation is passed--prevents the government from organizing sustained support for its programs. The fate of most legislation is in the hands of a "swing group" of deputies, numbering more than half the house, which gives or withholds its support largely



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on the strength of the oratorical and manipulative skill of various deputies on specific questions.

Most of the deputies represent the traditional and conservative elements in Afghanistan. Though well versed in village and tribal affairs, they arrive in Kabul with little understanding of formal parliamentary procedures or of the responsibilities and obligations of representative government. Half of them are barely literate and unable to understand complicated legal and constitutional questions. For this reason they tend to vote for the proposition using the simplest language. The count is taken by a show of hands and even on close votes, is only approximated. Moreover, there is well-founded suspicion that deputies sometimes vote twice. Parliamentary business is further hindered by chronic deputy absenteeism.

The sessions have been marked by heckling, name-calling, pushing, shoving, and fisticuffs despite new rules of procedure written by the deputies themselves and the house speaker's best efforts to keep order. Last November pro-Communist deputy Babrak made a speech offensive to both the monarchy and Islam which so enraged some conservative members that they ripped wooden slabs from their benches and attacked him. The ruckus that ensued resulted in the hospitalization of three left-wing deputies.

Relations with the Cabinet

The relations between the cabinet and the lower house are unstable and fluctuate from bare tolerance through mutual suspicion to open hostility. The two groups have--for the most part--had very different experiences and thus have considerably different outlooks. The ministers are a well-educated and widely traveled group. Most of the deputies, on the other hand, have spent the greater portion of their lives in the rural part of the country, and their outlook is conservative and traditional.

The deputies are jealous of their rights and privileges and have resented any attempts by the cabinet to infringe upon or ignore them. Cabinet members, however, to keep the government machinery running, have had few qualms about ignoring the real or fancied prerogatives of what they consider an often intractable legislature.

Antagonism between the deputies and the cabinet developed immediately after the parliament convened in October 1965. One of the first tasks of the deputies was to consider the king's reappointment of Mohammad Yusuf as prime minister. Leftist deputies Babrak and Mrs. Anahita, encouraged by Yusuf's personal enemies in the lower house started a movement to oppose the appointment which subsequently led as well to day-long students demonstrations put down by army troops at a

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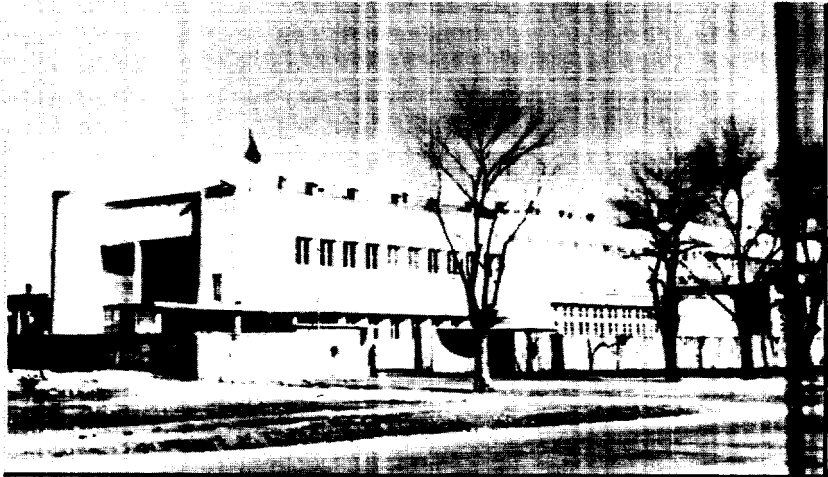
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Prime Minister  
MAIWANDWAL

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Afghanistan's Parliament Building



cost of three dead and scores injured. In the aftermath Yusuf resigned, and the King named Mohammad Maiwandwal instead as prime minister. Both he and his cabinet were subsequently confirmed by the lower house.

At the time, it was assumed that Maiwandwal was picked primarily because he was acceptable to all influential groups. Despite considerable diplomatic and administrative experience--he was ambassador to the US from 1958 to 1963 and held the post of minister of press and information in Yusuf's cabinet--Maiwandwal has proved to be a relatively weak leader. With few exceptions, his cabinet can also be characterized as indecisive and politically inept, and its relations with the lower house have been badly strained over several issues.

In December 1965 Maiwandwal named four new ministers without seeking parliamentary approval. This, the lower house contended, violated the spirit of the constitution--which the delegates interpreted as giving them the right to consider each cabinet minister when appointed. Maiwandwal contended that the house had the power to vote its confidence in the whole government but not in individual ministers. In the close vote that followed Maiwandwal won his point, but he also acquired a tremendous residue of ill feeling against his cabinet.

Additional strains developed over the question of keeping the parliament informed on government affairs. When the cabinet decided to create the post of minister for parliamentary affairs to maintain liaison between the executive and legislative branches, the deputies annulled the decree on the ground that the

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constitution charges the prime minister personally with this liaison function. Thenceforth Maiwandwal appeared in Parliament when asked to do so, and his appointee as liaison minister was not seen there again.

Personality differences have often reinforced differences over substantive issues. On one occasion, a deputy became so enraged at Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation Mohammad Akbar Reza that he suggested that they both "go outside and settle the matter." Interior Minister Shalizi has frequently riled the parliamentarians with his high-handed manner and his blunt--often discourteous--answers. Last October a number of deputies became so angered at Shalizi that they wrote to the King and requested he remove him from the cabinet. Although Shalizi submitted his resignation, the King refused to accept it, partially because he feared that giving in to parliamentary demands under pressure would establish an undesirable precedent. In January 1967, however, because of "an accumulation of factors." Shalizi's resignation was accepted, and his departure from the cabinet will probably improve the relations between the two branches of government.

Legislation

The legislative record of the Afghan Parliament has been poor. During the winter 1965 session, the lower house bogged down over writing its own rules of procedure and then had to

tackle the reform legislation of the Yusuf government, which, according to the constitution, it was required to approve. Moreover, a number of international agreements that had been negotiated since the implementation of the constitution had to be ratified.

Because the lower house also decided to review and amend much of the legislation passed by the Yusuf government for which explicit parliamentary approval was not required, little headway was made in any area and the summer 1966 session inherited a huge backlog of legislation. During the entire six-month summer session, however, Parliament approved only two bills, one resolution, and three international agreements. Seven resolutions and two bills passed by the lower house were bottlenecked in the upper house and a myriad of reform legislation did not pass beyond the debate or committee stage in either.

When the winter 1966 session of Parliament convened, the budget for fiscal year 1966 (21 March 1966 to 20 March 1967) had not yet been passed by the lower house. Almost the entire session was devoted to its consideration and passage to the exclusion of other important legislation.

One of the most important pieces of pending legislation (it was passed by the lower house but remains pigeonholed in the upper house) is the bill authorizing the establishment of

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political parties. Other important items awaiting consideration are the Third Five-year Plan and a mass of new reform legislation.

The Present Situation

Despite the occasional disorders in Parliament and that body's poor legislative record, the deputies have gained some experience in parliamentary procedures in the past year and a half and have demonstrated a slowly growing ability to deal with complicated legal and economic questions. Although relations between the lower house and the cabinet have been unstable and frequently hostile, the situation probably would improve measurably with the enactment of the political parties bill. A strong government party could bring about some consensus and organization in the Parliament and prevent much of the bickering and fancied slights. Prime Minister Maiwandwal has made some preliminary attempts to form such a party, but until the bill is passed he can make no formal arrangements.

Although the King remains aloof from the day-to-day affairs of government, he is still the paramount power in the country. While he has been displeased with some of the carryings-on in the parliament, he is still very much committed to the parliamentary experiment and would probably be reluctant to terminate it unless he felt the national interest required such a decision.

Certain members of the royal family and educated Afghans--including some who strongly encouraged the development of the parliamentary system--are, however, now expressing doubts about the imperfect political organism they helped to create. They find that they have little in common with the majority of the deputies and they deplore the ineffectiveness and disorganization of Parliament. Moreover, they feel that Maiwandwal is too weak a leader and they fear that his reform programs may be taking on too socialistic a tone.

Some of their uneasiness may be alleviated if Maiwandwal is replaced, and there have been many reports that this will be done in the near future. Until recently he had the support of the King, but there have been reports to indicate that the King is now dissatisfied with Maiwandwal for several reasons. In addition, the prime minister has undergone two serious operations in the past two years, and he may become physically incapable of the rigorous demands of his post. However, because Maiwandwal is scheduled to make an official visit to the US at the end of March, it is unlikely that any change would take place until after that time--if at all.

Outlook

Whoever is prime minister, the basic problem that remains is to resolve the underlying conflict between Afghanistan's

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progressive forces--represented by the King, foreign-trained military officers, and the educated urban elite--as opposed to the conservative and tradition-bound elements of society. Included in the latter are the tribal and religious groups, the rural population in general, and the overwhelming majority of parliamentary deputies. The gap between the two groups should become smaller as more people are educated, but with over 90 percent of the country illiterate, the problem remains a major one.

The immediate task is to try to control the conflicting forces within the democratic framework and simultaneously accomplish the economic, social, and political reforms necessary to make Afghanistan a modern state. It appears that the only person who could solve this immediate problem is a strong capa-

ble prime minister who could win the support of the King and the armed forces and the confidence of Parliament. Such a leader, however, would need to tread cautiously where royal prerogatives are involved or risk open conflict with the palace.

If, over a period of time. King Zahir is unable to find such a leader and the conflicts continue within the lower house and between the legislative and executive branches, it is possible the King will decide to suspend the experiment in parliamentary democracy and revert to a more authoritarian form of government. Another blow to the continuation of the liberal experiment would be the death of the King. The crown prince is regarded as incompetent by most observers and his elevation to the throne could set off a disastrous struggle for power.  
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